

## Toyota viewed 3-year-old accelerator problem as 'drivability' issue: Documents

Tuesday, June 1, 2010

By Mike De Souza, Canwest News Service

OTTAWA — Engineers from Toyota received warnings of accelerator problems in some of the manufacturer's new vehicles more than three years ago but dismissed them as a "drivability" problem unrelated to safety, reveals new evidence released at a parliamentary committee.

MPs received the information as Toyota officials returned to Parliament Hill for a second time Tuesday to answer questions about the events leading up to a massive safety recall in January on vehicles with the defective accelerator.

Toyota Canada's managing director, Stephen Beatty, said the company acted as soon as it had completed its scientific testing which confirmed safety concerns around the so-called "sticky pedal."

"There was no coverup," said Beatty, under a barrage of criticism and aggressive questioning from government and opposition MPs. "I'm confident that what has happened here was timely, but I recognize it hasn't given the perception of that . . . Under the specific circumstances, we moved as promptly as we possibly could."

The new evidence was part of about 200 pages of evidence submitted to the committee, including a Feb. 19 letter sent by Toyota to Transport Canada that listed a chronology of events.

"Starting in March 2007, Toyota received field technical information regarding reports of accelerator pedals demonstrating symptoms such as rough operation or being slow to return to the idle position," said the letter. "In June 2008, Toyota concluded that while accelerator pedal feeling could change under certain conditions, Toyota considered it to be a drivability issue unrelated to safety."

The U.S. government has fined Toyota \$16.4 million — the maximum allowed under American auto safety regulations — to settle allegations that the manufacturer didn't respond to safety concerns fast enough before issuing its recall, but a senior Transport Canada official said Canadian officials are still studying more than 9,000 pages of evidence on the matter.

"Certainly to date, we have not found anything new with respect to the sticky accelerator issue," said Gerard McDonald, an associate assistant deputy minister of safety and security for the department. "But as I indicated earlier, we're still analyzing some of those documents and we expect to be receiving some further documentation as well."

McDonald told the MPs that his department was also studying the Pedal Act, a private member's bill introduced by Liberal transport critic Joe Volpe, to see if it could help improve motor vehicle safety in the future.

The legislation, which is scheduled to be debated in the House of Commons on Thursday, was drafted to clarify the definition of safety-related defects and to eliminate loopholes. It would also require quarterly reports from manufacturers on safety-related issues, grant new powers to the minister to initiate a recall, and compel companies to install a brake-override system in vehicles with electronic-throttle control.

But Volpe suggested to McDonald that the department should have still taken action after it had verified some complaints on Toyota vehicles last fall.

"Clearly, you already knew that there was a safety-related problem. You already knew that there was potential danger," Volpe said. "Why would you let the company keep those vehicles on the road when you had already done the scientific assessment for them?"

McDonald said Transport Canada followed procedures in exchanging its information with Toyota and giving the company a chance to respond, but acknowledged that the matter took longer than expected to resolve.

"What we had were two complaints with respect to the (Toyota) Venza," said McDonald. "We felt it was an issue. We had done some analysis. We felt it deserved further followup with Toyota. We undertook that follow up.

"Again, we would have appreciated if it was done quicker than the 11 weeks that it took. But in the end we did get Toyota to take action on this issue."

The chronology of events, compiled by Toyota, also said that the company received reports of accelerator problems in its vehicles in Europe between December 2008 and August 2009, but concluded that it was a problem apparently limited to right-hand-drive vehicles.

Toyota officials, who first appeared at the parliamentary committee in March, said they have completed recalling 88 per cent of all vehicles targeted by the recall and still aim to achieve 100 per cent.

© Copyright (c) Canwest News Service